

Islamist Extremism in Bangladesh

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Summary

There is concern among observers that the secular underpinnings of moderate Bangladesh are being undermined by a culture of political violence and the rise of Islamist extremists. A further deterioration of Bangladesh's democracy and political stability may create additional space within which Islamist militants may be increasingly free to operate. Such a development may have destabilizing implications for Bangladesh, South Asia, and the Islamic world. They also have the potential to undermine U.S. interests. See CRS Report RL33646, *Bangladesh: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Bruce Vaughn, for additional information.

Contents

Recent Developments.....	1
Counterterror Efforts	1
Political Context.....	2
International Linkages.....	4

Contacts

Author Information.....	5
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Recent Developments

Some analysts believe the as yet unscheduled 2007 election in Bangladesh will at least in part be a referendum on the Bangladesh National Party's (BNP) government and the opposition Awami League's (AL) competing visions for Bangladesh. The roughly even political split between the BNP and the AL has given small Islamist parties a political voice disproportionate with their overall electoral support in the country. The BNP, by ruling in coalition with Islamist parties, has demonstrated its willingness to work with radical Islamists, while the AL has traditionally been critical of their activities. The Islamists' position within the government has also given them a new source of legitimacy.¹ The AL's signing of a Memorandum of Understanding with the fundamentalist Khelaphat-e-Majlis party in December 2006 further indicates the rising power of small Islamist parties.²

The United States and Britain are concerned over the rise of Islamist influence and militancy in Bangladesh. The U.S. Department of State *Country Reports on Terrorism* released in April 2006 observed that Bangladesh experienced an increase in terrorist activity. This included the emergence of the Jamaat ul-Mujahideen (JMB), a group that promotes a fundamentalist vision for Bangladesh. While pointing to "limited success" by the government, the report explained that "endemic corruption ... porous borders," and "the government's serious institutional, resource, and political constraints" all "undermine the government's broader counter terrorism posture."³ Former U.S. Ambassador to Bangladesh William Milam is reported to have stated, "I fear that Bangladesh might revert to its pre-1991 condition in which even the peaceful transfer of power after credible elections was not possible," adding, "This impasse has serious implications not only for Bangladesh but also for the South Asian region and the Islamic world."⁴ Britain's High Commissioner Anwar Choudhury, who was himself almost assassinated by extremists in 2004, is reported to have stated that there is "serious potential" for radical Islam to take hold in Bangladesh and that this would "change the geopolitics of our engagement with Islam and our efforts in countering terrorism."⁵

Counterterror Efforts

In November 2006, the Bangladesh Supreme Court upheld an earlier judgement sentencing several militants, including JMB leaders Abdur Rahman and Siddiqui Islam—also known as Bangla Bhai—to death.⁶ Bhai is also thought to have been the military commander of the Jangrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB). The JMJB has been described as a sister organization of the JMB. The two were arrested in March 2006 and are thought to be responsible for organizing over 400 near simultaneous explosions on Aug. 17, 2005. Despite their arrests, the government is viewed as having had only limited success in dismantling JMB networks. Some view the government's efforts to explore possible linkages with the BNP and Islamist parties as "timid."⁷ The government outlawed the JMB and the JMJB in February 2005, reportedly in a policy

¹ A. Tariq Karim and Christine Fair, *Bangladesh at the Crossroads*, United States Institute of Peace, January 2007.

² "Another Afghanistan?" *The Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 11, 2007.

³ U.S. Department of State, "Country Reports: South Asia Overview," in *Country Reports on Terrorism*, Released by the Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, Apr. 28, 2006.

⁴ William Milam, "Bangladesh at the Crossroads," *Daily Times* (Pakistan), Jan. 10, 2007.

⁵ Peter Foster, "Bangladesh at Risk of Falling to Extremists," *The Daily Telegraph*, Dec. 4, 2006.

⁶ "Bangladesh Court Rejects Militant's Appeal," *Janes Information Group*, Nov. 29, 2006.

⁷ "Captures Fail to Halt Bangladesh Militants," *Janes Information Group*, Apr. 12, 2006.

reversal brought on by international pressure.⁸ Experts feel that their arrest and trial does not in and of itself “address the prospect of quiet, creeping Islamisation.”⁹

The government’s Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) has made some further moves against terrorist groups. In December 2006, a RAB raid reportedly uncovered explosives and detonators in a raid and seized additional detonators after a shootout with JMB militants.¹⁰ There are increasing concerns about human rights violations associated with the RAB. They have been described as “a government death squad” by Human Rights Watch.¹¹ Amnesty International has also expressed its concern over “reports of excessive use of force by police and army personnel.”¹²

Indian authorities arrested two individuals from Bangladesh in New Delhi on Jan. 4, 2007. The two were in possession of explosives and are thought to have been planning to carry out a bombing in the capital in the lead up to Republic Day activities.¹³ India hopes to complete construction of a Indo-Bangla border fence to prevent cross border infiltration into India of Bangladesh based militants and terrorists.¹⁴

Political Context

Bangladesh’s form of moderate Islam is increasingly under threat by radical elements while its political and economic development continues to be hampered by the forces of corruption, radicalism, and partisan fighting. This was evident in the lead up to the election scheduled for January 2006. Rivalry between the leaders of the nation’s two largest political parties has led to an ongoing series of demonstrations, strikes, and, increasingly, to politically motivated violence. The frustration caused by the combination of poverty, corruption, and the lack of good governance due to a stalemated political process is thought by some to contribute to increasing radicalization of society.

The radical Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HuJI) is thought to have ties to both Al Qaeda and the Islamic Oikya Jote, which is a coalition partner of the BNP. Some view the BNP’s coalition with hardline Islamist coalition members as promoting the spread of violence.¹⁵ In the U.S. State Department’s Country Reports on Terrorism, HuJI is on the list of other groups of concern, as is the JMB. It is also thought to have been behind an assassination attempt on then Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in July 2000.¹⁶ HuJI also signed the 1998 fatwa by Osama bin Laden which declared American civilians to be legitimate targets.¹⁷ It is thought to be the group behind the January 2002 attack on the American Center in Calcutta.¹⁸

The Jamaat-e-Islami, which is in coalition with the BNP, is thought to have had ties with fundamentalist leader Bangla Bhai, who promoted Islamic revolution in Bangladesh. Bangla Bhai

⁸ “Jamaat ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB),” *Janes Information Group*, Mar. 6, 2006.

⁹ “Bangladesh Today,” *International Crisis Group Report No. 121*, October 2006.

¹⁰ “Counter-terrorist Forces Raid Safe Houses in Bangladesh,” *Janes Information Group*, Jan. 2, 2007.

¹¹ Brad Adams, as quoted in “Bangladesh: Elite Force Tortures, Kills Detainees,” *Human Rights Watch*, Dec. 14, 2006.

¹² “Bangladesh: Human Rights Under Threat as Election Tensions Intensify,” *Amnesty International*, Jan. 9, 2007.

¹³ “Indian Police Catch two Suspected Militants in Delhi,” *Reuters*, Jan. 17, 2007.

¹⁴ “Indo-Bangla Border Fencing to Complete Soon,” *The Economic Times*, Jan. 23, 2007.

¹⁵ Testimony by Dr. Christine Fair, Human Rights Watch, Congressional Human Rights Caucus Hearing on Bangladesh, May 24, 2005.

¹⁶ U.S. Department of State, *Patterns of Global Terrorism 2002*, April 2003, p. 133.

¹⁷ U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism, 2004*, April 2005.

¹⁸ “Captures Fail to Halt Bangladesh Militants,” *Janes Information Group*, Apr. 12, 2006.

fought in Afghanistan and sought to install a Taliban-style government in Bangladesh. His supporters reportedly terrorized communists, leftists, liberal intellectuals, Hindus, Christians, members of the Islamic Ahmadiyya sect, and Buddhists in the cause of promoting Islamic extremism.¹⁹ The government of Bangladesh was criticized by the Awami League for denying the existence of fundamentalist organizations in Bangladesh. The Bangladesh government banned Bangla Bhai's organization in 2005.²⁰ Today, many fear that JI has been colonizing the BNP from within the coalition.²¹

The roots of the current political divide can be traced to the origins of the Bangladesh state in 1947 when Bangladesh became the eastern part of the newly independent state of Pakistan. At that time, Bangladesh's religious identity served as the basis of its political disposition despite linguistic and other divisions. Many Islamists sided with Pakistan during Bangladesh's struggle for independence in 1971. Bangladesh's ethnic identity then took on new prominence. Many who collaborated with Pakistan in committing atrocities against Bengalis in 1971 were members of Islamist parties.²²

Given its past use of Islam for legitimacy, a return to power by the military could create further opportunities for Islamists in Bangladesh. Some experts see military rule as having given the Islamists an opening into what is largely a secular society in Bangladesh. Bangladesh has been ruled by the military for approximately 15 of the past 35 years. Regional expert Sumit Ganguly asserts that the military's desire for legitimacy led them to "wrap themselves in the mantle of Islam" and this created new political space for Islamists in Bangladesh. As a result, "they not only altered the terms of political discourse in Bangladesh but also helped fashion a new political culture that could accommodate a shift toward a more pristine, austere, and parochial vision of Islam."²³ This analysis gives cause for concern that the military is thought by some as once again seeking to play a political role behind the scenes by seeking to delay the 2007 elections.²⁴ Former Military Ruler retired General Hussain Mohamad Ershad (1982-1990) stated in January 2007 that the military would not intervene in the current political struggle.²⁵

Violent and obstructionist political rivalry is debilitating to Bangladesh. Former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina of the Awami League survived an assassination attempt in August 2004 when a grenade was thrown at her, killing 20 others. Hasina has accused the BNP-Jamaat alliance of being involved in the assassination attempt.²⁶ In 2005, Khaleda Zia was reportedly still asserting that there were no Islamic fundamentalists in Bangladesh, though her government subsequently achieved some success in suppressing such elements.²⁷ Such attacks have undermined political stability in Bangladesh. An Indian government report found an "alarming rise" in political assassinations in Bangladesh and is also concerned with the smuggling of arms to insurgents in India's northeast as well as the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Bangladesh.²⁸

¹⁹ Eliza Griswold, "The Next Islamist Revolution?," *The New York Times Magazine*, Jan. 23, 2005.

²⁰ "Jalil-OPM," *United News of Bangladesh*, Feb. 25, 2005.

²¹ "Bangladesh Today," *International Crisis Group Report No. 121*, October 2006.

²² Christine Fair, "On the Issues: Bangladesh," *U.S. Institute of Peace*, Jan. 17, 2007.

²³ Sumit Ganguly, "The Rise of Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh," *U.S. Institute of Peace Special Report*, August 2006.

²⁴ Nora Boustany, "Bangladesh Military Accused of Stalling on Elections," *The Washington Post*, Jan. 25, 2007.

²⁵ "Ex-Military Dictator Rules Out Coup in Bangladesh," *Asia Pacific News*, Jan. 19, 2007.

²⁶ "Hasina-Departure," *United News of Bangladesh*, Mar. 7, 2005.

²⁷ "Khleda Denies Existence of Islamic Fundamentalists in Bangladesh," *Press Trust of India*, Mar. 16, 2005.

²⁸ "Alarming Rise in Assassinations in Bangladesh," *Agence France Presse*, May 13, 2005.

International Linkages

When visiting Dhaka in September 2004, former State Department Coordinator for Counterterrorism Cofer Black reportedly stated that he was concerned over “the potential utilization of Bangladesh as a platform for international terrorism.”²⁹ Media reports in India increasingly are concerned that Bangladesh has the potential to become a “center of extremist Wahhabi-oriented terrorism.”³⁰ Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HuJI) reportedly sent a letter to the Indian High Commission to Bangladesh in December 2004 threatening to kill the Indian cricket team if they entered Bangladesh. The team planned to play a series of test matches in Bangladesh in December including in the Chittagong region.³¹ One source reported that the number of radical mosques and madrassas in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) region of Bangladesh had grown considerably and that HuJI continued to maintain several terrorist training camps in the CHT region.³² Another source also linked the camps to HuJI and indicated that they receive funding from Islamic charities with ties to Al-Qaeda.³³ HuJI is thought to remain active in the area south from Chittagong and the border with Burma. A report sourced to a former senior Indian intelligence official alleges that HuJI is training Burmese Muslim Rohingyas, as well as small groups from Thailand, Cambodia, Indonesia, and Brunei.³⁴

There is concern that Bangladesh might serve as a base of support to various militant groups. Al Qaeda had reportedly recruited Rohingyas from refugee camps in southeastern Bangladesh to fight in Afghanistan, Kashmir, and Chechnya. Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HuJI) was founded by Osama bin Laden associate Fazlul Rahman.³⁵ Rahman joined bin Laden’s World Islamic Front for the Jihad Against the Jews and the Crusaders in 1998.³⁶ It has the objective of establishing Islamic rule in Bangladesh. HuJI has recruited its members, thought to number from several thousand to 15,000, from the tens of thousands of madrassas in Bangladesh, many of which are led by veterans of the “jihad” against the Soviets in Afghanistan. The organization is thought to have at least six camps in Bangladesh as well as ties to militants in Pakistan.³⁷ It was reported that French intelligence prompted the arrest of 16 Bangladeshis on Dec. 4, 2003, in Bolivia for allegedly planning to hijack a plane to attack the United States. According to reports, they were later released for lack of evidence. Eleven Bangladeshis were arrested in Saudi Arabia on Aug. 14, 2003, on suspicion of planning a terrorist act.³⁸

The Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO) represents over 120,000 Rohingyas in Bangladesh. The Rohingya also speak the same language as Bangladeshis from the Chittagong area. These “destitute and stateless people” have been open to recruitment to various militant Islamist groups.

²⁹ Dan Morrison, “Terror on the Rise in Bangladesh,” *Newsday*, Nov. 23, 2004.

³⁰ G. Parthasarathy, “In a Disturbed Neighborhood,” *Business Line* (The Hindu), Sept. 24, 2004.

³¹ “Terror Threat Delays Indian Tour Opener,” *The Daily Telegraph*, Dec. 9, 2004.

³² Anirban Roy, “Qaeda Fuels HuJI Run in Bangladesh,” *Hindustan Times*, Dec. 9, 2004.

³³ Dan Morrison, “Terror on the Rise in Bangladesh,” *Newsday*, Nov. 23, 2004.

³⁴ Shefali Rekhi, “Clerics’ Call to Terror,” *The Straits Times*, Oct. 21, 2004.

³⁵ Zachary Abuza, *Militant Islam in Southeast Asia*, (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003), p. 174.

³⁶ Rohan Gunaratna, *Inside Al Qaeda* (New York: Berkeley Books, 2003), p.60.

³⁷ U.S. Department of State, Office of the Coordinator of Counter-terrorism, *Patterns of Global Terrorism*, 2002, April 2003, p.133-4. See also Bertil Lintner, “Religious Extremism and Nationalism in Bangladesh,” Paper presented at the Center for Security Studies, Honolulu, HI, Aug. 19, 2002.

³⁸ Anand Kumar, “Bangladesh Weak Link in War on Terror,” *The Straits Times*, Dec. 16, 2003.

The RSO has reportedly received support from the Jamaat-e-Islami in Bangladesh. Afghan instructors are reported to have been seen in RSO camps.³⁹

There are also reports, based on information derived from the interrogation of Jemaah Islamiya leader Hambali, who was arrested in Thailand in August 2003, that indicate that he had made a decision to shift JI elements to Bangladesh in response to recent counter-terrorist activity in Southeast Asia. The decision to move operations west may also be evident in the arrest of 13 Malaysians and 6 Indonesians, including Hambali's brother Rusman Gunawan, in Pakistan in September 2003. Bangladeshis have been among those arrested in Pakistan on suspicion of being linked to terrorist organizations.⁴⁰ Some have speculated that JI militants, thought to be from Malaysia and Singapore, would not have made it to southeastern Bangladesh without some degree of tacit agreement from the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence of Bangladesh which is thought, by some, to have close ties with ISI.⁴¹ These reports are difficult to confirm.

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³⁹ Bertil Lintner, "Bangladesh: Breeding Ground for Muslim Terror," <http://www.atimes.com>.

⁴⁰ "Pakistan Nabs Six More Terror Suspects," *Xinhua News Agency*, Sept. 26, 2003.

⁴¹ Bertil Lintner, "Bangladesh: Celebrations and Bombs," <http://www.atimes.com>.